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## ABSTRACT

An ongoing investigation on the nature of literature-based instruction in schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged children is in the process of describing various aspects of literacy teaching and learning in four schools, two rural, one urban, and one semi-urban. The investigation is qualitative in nature, longitudinal, and involves close collaboration with 10 teachers who participate regularly in focus groups set up by the researchers and in interviews with the researchers. A study which is part of this investigation used primary data from interviews with 49 children in 8 teacher-collaborator classrooms in grades 1 through 4. Interviewers asked children to describe themselves as readers and writers and how they go about reading and writing. Findings showed that in none of the classrooms was it common for students to engage in discussions of the reading and writing processes. Nor was it common for them to be encouraged to assess their own abilities. A discussion, included in the study, of 3 main issues--self-assessment, assessing teaching and learning, and the range of conceptual frameworks for understanding the nature of literacy activities--provide deeper elaboration on the results. Excerpts of some of the children's opinions illustrate the results. In general, the study concludes that from an assessment standpoint, educators must be concerned about the theories children hold about literacy and about themselves as literate learners. Current standardized assessment practices obscure rather than reveal the complexities of children's literate constructs, and do not support self-assessment. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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## **Assessment, Self-Assessment, and Children's Literate Constructs**

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Assessment primarily involves interpreting and representing learning. As teachers, the sense we make of children's literate behavior and the manner in which we represent it are colored by our own literate histories, our language, and our beliefs (Mehan, 1993). Consequently, two teachers assessing the same child might make quite different sense of the same behaviors. More importantly, neither might coincide with the meaning that the child is making, a difference that is often hard to appreciate. Even when it is noticed, the child's perspective is commonly seen as deviant or deficient with respect to the "correct" or "standard" perspective (Johnston, Afflerbach, & Weiss, 1993). The beliefs underlying the common transmission model of teaching place the burden on the students to understand the teacher's perspective rather than the other way around.

There is a second reason why children's understandings of their literate lives are important, namely, it is within these constructs that self-assessment takes place. The extent of children's self-assessment is important (Paris & Winograd, 1990), but literate constructs within which children assess themselves are even more important. For example, if a child understands literacy as an ability that one has more or less of, it would be possible for that child to assess him or herself as simply unable (Nicholls, 1989). If literacy is understood as an individual activity, cooperative literate activity might not count in a child's self-assessment. To understand self-assessment we must understand the constructs through which children assess their literate selves.

Recently there have been several explorations of children's understandings of their literate lives (Dahl & Freppon, in press; Dyson, 1993; Guice, 1992; Rasinski & DeFord, 1988). In this paper we extend these explorations by emphasizing the diversity and dimensionality of literate constructions and by focusing on issues of assessment and self-assessment.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study is part of a larger, ongoing investigation of the nature of literature-based instruction in schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged children. We are in the process of describing various aspects of literacy teaching and learning in four schools: two rural, one urban, and one semi-urban. Our investigation is qualitative in nature

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985), longitudinal, and involves close collaboration with 10 teachers, with whom we meet regularly in focus groups, whom we formally and informally interview, and whose children we observe in their classrooms.

The primary data for this study come from interviews with 49 children in eight teacher-collaborator classrooms in Grades 1 to 4. The interviews were conducted by our research team near the end of the second year of a 5-year study. We asked children to describe themselves as readers and writers and how they go about reading and writing. Some of the interviews we have drawn on were semistructured and others were structured entirely around ongoing classroom activity (Patton, 1990). However, they all were grounded in our previous and ongoing work with teachers in these classrooms.

Just as our data are grounded in our previous work, so is our analysis. We cannot separate our analyses of these data from our thoughts about previous interviews with teachers, conversations with teachers about children, and observations in classrooms. Thus, we analyzed this data set using constant comparison methods with the intent of generating a grounded explanation of our research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We began by first reading all of the transcripts, making open codings of the ways students talked about their literacy, and generating a coding scheme. We then reread transcripts and collapsed codes into larger categories representing dimensions of students' perspectives. Next, we coded data for these dimensions and searched for counterexamples and/or discrepant cases. Thus, we became familiar with the dimensions of diversity in our sample before focusing our attention on issues of children's self-assessment. In these readings we looked for themes and surprises in individual students' comments, and contrasts between individual cases. Finally, we related these analyses to our previous analyses of interviews with the students' teachers where we asked them, among other things, to describe two different children's literate development (Johnston & Guice, 1993).

## FINDINGS

In none of these classrooms was it common for students to engage in discussion of the processes of reading and writing. Nor was it common for them to be encouraged to self-assess. We should not have been surprised then, that most of the students registered some surprise and confusion when first asked to describe themselves as readers and writers. Some were additionally confused because their construction of "self" did not overlap with their understanding of "writer," thus violating the assumption of our question "How would you describe yourself as a writer?"

We begin by describing the issues of self-assessment and assessment of teaching and learning as they arose in the interviews. We then describe the range of literate constructs, each

of which has implications for self-assessment. We conclude by connecting this particular study to our previous work (Johnston & Guice, 1993) to address broader issues of classroom assessment.

### Self-Assessment

Although most of these children could talk some about their literate lives, few of them had a rich descriptive language with which to do so. When asked to describe themselves as a reader (or as a writer) the predominant response was "good," "bad," "OK," or some similar linear evaluative term. Many could not describe why they made that assessment. Nonetheless, individual children's assessments of themselves as readers and writers ranged from "I am an artist reader" to "I'm medium" to "a good reader, like all of my family." A handful of children described themselves in detail and assessed themselves in quite complex ways.

On the other hand, some children, although able to talk about reading and writing in quite complex ways, provided surprisingly simple linear assessments of themselves. For example, Kevin described his favorite books and authors, worrying over distinctions such as whether Tomie DePaola is primarily an artist or an illustrator. However, when asked how he would describe himself as a reader, he went directly to a numerical rating giving himself a "Three plus out of five." Though unable to explain why, he felt he was not a five because, as he said, "I'm not *that* good. . . ." When asked to describe himself as a writer, he assessed himself as "Maybe four plus" because "I know how to spell good. I'm kind of sloppy. I hurry a lot. I hate to write. . . . It's so boring."

In order to assess himself, Kevin reduced reading and writing to simple linear scales. He did this in a classroom in which there is considerable freedom in reading and writing and in which children regularly make books. Indeed, although he had made several books, Kevin's evaluation of his writing was based on his mastery of the conventions of spelling. That he loved to read and was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about specific authors and illustrators, and that he hated to write, did not play a part in his assessments of himself as a reader and writer.

Kevin's emphasis on the word-accuracy dimension was just one of many different emphases in children's self-assessments. Sheer number of books read was a primary criterion for some children's self-evaluations. For example, Lenny pointed out that he had read ten books, and "I would have read twelve of them but the bell rang." He could not remember any authors' names or book titles, but he felt that good readers read lots of books. He himself had written and illustrated five books, but when asked about himself as an author, Lenny balked at the premise.

Todd described himself as a good reader. He liked to read "when there's interesting stuff" although he "didn't really read much this year. . . . I couldn't find an interesting book." He believed that good readers concentrate, and select books that they can read independently, but that reading a lot is not an important dimension of literacy.

Children also assessed one another, although we did not ask them to do so. When describing how you can tell whether someone is a good reader, Sara described instead who is not: "People make fun of them because they can't read a lot." In describing the situation, she made distinctions between effort and ability, and between chapter books and other books. She also distinguished social motives:

They can't read that much. I know their names. Bill, Steve, Jeff, and I think Jimmy. He can't read that good, so I help him. . . . Bill is getting a lot better. So is Jeff. Steve is having a little trouble because now Chris can read a chapter book. One chapter a day. But he tries a lot to read. Real hard. . . . He's good at writing. . . [but]. . . sometimes he makes things backwards, but he made that one [book].

Sara is matter-of-factly confident about herself as a writer. She considers herself a "good" author and points to her favorite pieces: "One's a picture book and one's a chapter book. It's called *The Mystery of Sam Serachi's Brother*. . . . It's cool."

### **Assessing Teaching and Learning**

Part of assessing one's own learning is deciding what help one needs. To learn about this we asked children what things helped them become better readers and writers, and what teachers did that helped or was not helpful. Children's notions of themselves as readers and writers and what would help them become better readers and writers were generally congruent. For example, Janet, an inner-city third grader, referred to stories as those coming from "the red book" [the basal]. She felt that good reading is "reading the words right" and that her teacher should do more reading in a group, round robin reading. Janet also described herself as not a good writer, "'cause sometimes I didn't know how to spell a lot of the words." She suggested that teachers could help her with her writing by telling her "how to spell words." Janet believes that she can help herself by "reading more. . . and asking how to spell words." According to her notions of good reading and writing, Janet has figured out some useful strategies to better herself.

Almost all of the children mentioned practice as a means of becoming a better reader and writer. Most children believed that everything that their teacher did helped them become better readers and writers. For example, a third grader commented that practicing for standardized testing helps him become a better reader "'cause they have words we don't know. And you find them out, and then you know them." When asked what they would suggest a teacher do

to help, they generally described the routines or roles of their classroom, such as: "They read them stories. We have reading partners, we read together, and she lets us do our work, help each other." Or, "Well, what she do is tell them . . . stop talking . . . she would tell them to sit there in their seats and get back to their work." Maintaining classroom order was high on the list of several children from the inner-city school.

Only one of the children, a third grader, was quite clear about unhelpful teaching practices. Kate advised:

. . . don't get frustrated with the child . . . if you get frustrated with the child, it might even be worse, 'cause then they know, "oh gee, she can't help me, so who's gonna help me," so they just get stuck on more words, and no one can help them. So they won't become the best reader.

According to Kate, teachers are also unhelpful "when you are stuck, saying 'you are just going to have to figure it out for yourself.'" We know from our conversations with Kate and her teacher that she has very clear notions of herself as a reader and writer in and out of school (see her comments in following passages). This strong personal literate identity could account for her more critical view of what helps her learn to read and write.

### **The Range of Conceptual Frameworks**

Different children understood reading and writing in many different ways. Most surprising to us was not the range per se, but the range that could occur within a single classroom. We thought that individual classrooms would reflect greater similarity in perspective than we found. Furthermore, although there were clear consistencies in children's understandings, individual children were rarely "pure" examples of any theme we could extract.

*Reading and Writing Connections.* Most of the children we interviewed believed that reading and writing are interconnected. Many children indicated that they would be better writers if they read more, and better readers if they wrote more. For example, Lee, a third grader, commented, "I am a good reader because I read books . . . [and] reading helps you learn how to write." Several of the children focused the connection on spelling, believing that reading and writing helped them learn to spell more words. For example, Max suggested that "reading is cool . . . you get to learn a lot of stuff, and you get to spell better too."

Kate explained a different connection between reading and writing:

If [writers] know that they're sort of bad at it, they'll ask somebody, because they want to be good. And that person can also help you have a good imagination, get them to read a little bit more, show them what imagination means by showing them a piece of your writing.

Kate believes that reading helps one develop the imagination needed to be a good writer and that literacy learning is a collaborative activity motivated by an interest in being "good." Kate assumes that, like her, her classmates would want to be "good" and would seek help from peers to achieve that end.

Children also connected reading and writing through illustration. The first graders who spoke of this clearly distinguished between writing and illustrating, but also emphasized the importance of illustration in their own writing. Mary explained reading, writing, and illustrating in her description of the ways teachers help kids become better writers:

M: She lets them draw pictures, and she, we show her.

I: After you show her the pictures, what do you do then?

M: Well, we read it.

I: So the pictures help you with your writing?

M: Well, they help you by telling you what do I do.

For Mary, the illustration is the story, it explains her meaning, it drives the topic. The same was true for Keith, a reluctant writer. He commented: "When I write I usually draw pictures. . . . I like pets. But, I'm not that good at drawing them. I'm good at drawing fish." Concerned about convention and accuracy in his drawing, his topic selection depended upon his technical artistic skill.

Although all children believed that reading and writing are interconnected in one way or another, they differed in the nature of the connections and in the extent of the interconnectedness. Also, some children's construction of reading differed from their construction of writing, and they assessed themselves differently in the two domains.

*Literacy as Social Enterprise.* Some children understood literacy as a social enterprise. For example, some of the children we interviewed spoke in terms of peers such as "we write . . . we read" when discussing their views on reading and writing. In one class a group of boys had formed their own book club, and they asked the researcher to join as they collaborated to write individual pieces. The club involved reading and making books.

I: Oh you make books too? That's pretty neat.

S1: Yeah. 'Cause Todd made one.

S2: Yeah and you made one for the contest and you won.

S3: MMhmm. I helped him. Go get the book you made Todd.

These children appear to construct literacy in social terms, as individually in control of their reading and writing, but part of a larger group that provides playful, literate, support.

By contrast, other children viewed reading and writing as technical and individual, focusing on convention and accuracy, particularly at the word level, and on a hierarchy of

skills and ability. One of these students' understanding of good reading was "following the words . . . reading very well . . . looking at the words . . . [and] . . . going into second grade." Her understanding of reading as a technical matter was complicated by her experience of being retained. In part, for her, successful reading was a key to the locked door of second grade.

*Patterns of Authority.* A few of the children viewed themselves as literate persons in control of their reading and writing. Some children mentioned, for example, enjoying and being competent at reading when they felt like it or had interesting books. Steve, a third grader, when asked what he does that doesn't help him become a better reader, commented: "Just saying the words. . . . Like you say a word, and if you don't feel like reading, you just say any word." Lee was similarly aware of his control over or through his reading: "Sometimes when I read I don't think. I just read it." Both boys were very aware of reading for meaning rather than merely decoding, but sometimes chose the latter.

Some other children expressed authority over their reading and writing in very different ways. Kate was aware of multiple purposes for writing and strongly desired to write to record and revisit her thoughts. In a classroom that emphasized "content area" writing, she desired more opportunities to write personal narratives. She said:

Well, I'm gonna write a book. Well, if I ever get around to it. I was planning on writing one. . . . if I ever have the time. . . . I said before, it would be sort of neat if I could write more about myself, and my personal life, and one day have my first grade or second grade teacher pick it up and say, oh, I had this kid in my class.

Kate has a strong sense of herself as a writer, but she feels she does not have control of the context of her writing.

Many of the younger children attributed to the teacher or another adult the authority over their reading and writing. This came up throughout the interviews of many of the first graders and most of the inner-city third graders experiencing literacy instruction from a "literature-based" basal reader. For example, Mark thought of reading in terms of accuracy, and writing in terms of handwriting. He attributed his increasing accuracy to help from adults. According to him, the kinds of things that help kids become good readers and writers are: "Practice, read to them and stuff. . . . If you find a hard word, she [Mother] could tell you, you would remember it." He felt that the way his teacher helped was to "Tell us to read books, and we have to practice writing cursive."

Several other children spoke about teachers "making" them read, "telling" them words, "making" them write. Andy believed that "going to reading class" is what would help him become a better reader and writer. Jessie, a first grader, explained that she gets better because:

The teacher makes the lines and she make the things . . . you can just write anything you want. She give you the paper . . . they help us do your work. Our teacher she tell us what to do on the chart board . . . she tell us the words on the board, so we know.

These children see the teacher as the authority in that she knows the words and can tell them. She is also the source of motivation for reading and writing, which these children perhaps would not choose to do without the teacher making them.

Another location of authority was common in interviews with children attending an inner-city school. Here authority was attributed to the text as well as to the teacher. These children referred to texts—such as standardized tests, basal readers, and books—as having the power to help them learn to read. Leon, for example, referred to the basal in positive terms: “It help you read.” We did not see this reference to texts as authorities in children from other schools.

*Distinctions between Home and School Reading and Writing.* Many children distinguished different contexts within which self-evaluation could occur. In particular, many children distinguished between home and school literacy, a distinction that came up in a variety of conversational contexts. For example, Karen described herself as a good reader, “like all of my family,” and mentioned reading *The Secret Garden* with her mother, who has helped her learn to read:

She always brung me to get books for me to read . . . and she helped me with the words and told me authors like, um, ah, Jack Kent and, ah, Patricia Riley Giff, I can't say all the authors, but she gave me one of the books. . . . My sister she had like a library. And I could get some *Baby Sitters' Club* there. That's how I learned to read a lot.

These family reading experiences were related by children in every classroom and involved mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, and neighbors. They involved being read to, reading to or with them, and having books selected, loaned, or bought. Reading at home had to do with relationships and intimacy, reading favorite books, and absorbed engagement. Sara described staying up so late to read “this whole book” that in the morning she couldn't wake up. Being a reader outside of school was not the same as inside.

Shawn spoke of reading in terms of classroom routines, until he described a special book he was reading with a family member:

- I: Well, what makes you a good reader?  
S: Just practice.  
I: Just practice? Do teachers do anything that helps?  
S: They read to us.  
I: They read to you? Anything else?

- S: They teach us. . . . They put all sorts of words on the board and we have to do spelling and write sentences.
- I: Oh, and those things help you?
- S: Yeah, we get to read them . . . and she keeps books on the counter and we read them.
- I: Mhm, what's the best book you've read lately?
- S: Well, [shift to more animated voice] upstairs at my cousin's house, there's this turtle book and I'm interested in that and I'm on chapter 2 or 3. I just started it yesterday. Right before I went to bed, me and my cousin did. He read one page, and I read another, then he read two, and I read two, and we kept on doing the same amount . . . he's ten. He's good. He has books.

For many of the children we interviewed, like Shawn, home literate activity was described in much more rich and vivid terms than school reading and writing.

Paul spoke of reading in school as a quite technical matter, but when writing came up, he omitted school as if it were irrelevant:

- I: So what about a writer? What sort of writer are you?
- P: Me and my friend . . . always make books.
- I: Do you?
- P: Yeah, at my house. We make "The Supershrepper," "Ninja Turtles and the Superladies," and "The Strong Men Who Fight Time."
- I: So you're quite an author are you?
- P: Mhm. It's, like I like to write, and he draws the pictures.
- I: I see. So what makes a good author do you think?
- P: I think the one who writes the stories is always the best because they take the time.
- I: And you're good at that huh?
- P: Mhm.
- I: How'd you get to be good at that?
- P: Umm, I guess my next door neighbor taught me how to do all these things. . . . He's a fourth grader.

Paul, like many of the children we interviewed, has a rich, literate life beyond the realm of school. These children identify themselves as authors, illustrators, and readers with clear understandings of what that means, understandings that often differ from their understandings of themselves as readers and writers in school.

### Discussion

From an assessment standpoint we must be concerned about the theories children hold about literacy and themselves as literate learners. It is these understandings that allow us to render as anything other than bizarre such behaviors as invented spellings, oral reading miscues, or any other pattern of literate behavior. Indeed, the ability of teachers to imagine the literate worlds of children appears to be a major assessment skill. We intended this study

to help nurture that imagination by providing snapshots of children's expressions so that others might imagine how children they know might view themselves as literate.

The discourse norms of the classroom can make self-assessment more or less common, and more or less complex. Thus, children in some classrooms are more able to help teachers understand their perspectives than are other children. The children we interviewed were used neither to examining their theories publicly nor to being asked to assess themselves as literate individuals. On the other hand, children's offhand comments, in-process explanations, and seemingly playful expressions about being literate were rich sources of information about children's literate constructs and may help teachers become more knowledgeable about how children think of themselves as literate.

Classrooms provide a context for socializing children's literate constructions and their self-assessments, which led us to expect children's self-assessments to reflect teachers' assessment frameworks. In our previous work (Johnston & Guice, 1993), we found that some of these children's teachers often ranked students numerically when describing their literacy development. Although there was some reflection of this framework in children's self-assessments, we found much diversity among their literate constructs. Retrospectively, we might have anticipated this. Although all of the children in this study were involved in some form of literature-based curriculum, each of these eight classrooms, even ones in the same school, was different from the others. Each of the teachers was in transition between different understandings of reading and writing and teaching and learning. They were also caught in conflicts between school mandates and personal beliefs. These conflicts were reflected in classroom talk about books, assessment practices, literature anthologies, and book use (Johnston & Guice, 1993). Children made sense of their literate lives within these conflicting contexts. Thus, there were discontinuities in the children's constructions of literacy and of themselves as literate. It seems that teachers could learn about the experienced curriculum by investigating the discontinuities in children's self-assessments and use such information to reflect on the effects of curriculum and teaching practices.

Children made sense of literacy and of themselves as literate in more than one context, notably both in and outside of school. These children's teachers' descriptions of their students' literacy rarely included the literacy of the home except to explain deficiencies. It certainly was not spoken of in the positive terms students revealed to us. This might well relate to the separation of home and school literacy by many of these children.

The constructs children use to understand literacy and themselves as literate individuals are a critical assessment issue for several reasons. First, their self-assessments have implications for their continuing engagement in literate activity. Children who view literacy as a capacity will respond differently to an assessment of "unable" than will children who

view literacy in terms of competence or as a social enterprise (Nicholls, 1989). Second, in order to understand and productively respond to children's difficulties in reading and writing, classroom teachers' assessments must reveal some of the complexity in children's literate understandings. Third, in some classrooms, self-assessment is seen as a normal part of literacy, and in other classrooms it is not, placing a greater burden on the teachers' assessments. Fourth, current standardized assessment practices obscure rather than reveal the complexities of children's literate constructs, and do not support self-assessment. They are thus unlikely to serve instruction well.

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